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ABSTRACT

This speech examines the role of associations, such as the Council for Exceptional Children and the Council of Administrators of Special Education, in influencing the development of public policy. Critical functions of such groups are identified and include provision of comprehensive information in the area of interest, provision of analysis of public policy issues (through both journals and meetings), and provision of a mechanism for members to influence public policy. The recent trend of increased collaboration and coalition among related associations in both general and special education is welcomed, though further collaborations (e.g., with the mental health community, early childhood service providers, and adult service providers) are urged. Also noted is the influence that association members can have on the development of regulations after legislation is enacted. Association members are urged to greater involvement to make their voices heard. (DB)

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THE ROLE OF ASSOCIATIONS IN FORMULATING AND INFLUENCING PUBLIC POLICY

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In our session today, I'd like to leave some time for discussion and to answer any questions I might be able to which would assist you in making your own Subdivision, Division, Federation or Chapter a stronger one but first I'd like to spend a few moments today talking with you about what I see as the role and the potential role of professional associations in the formulating and influencing of public policy. Virtually everyone in this room is a member of one or more associations. Most of you are members of CASE and of CEC and many belong to additional associations as well. What I'm going to do this afternoon is to talk a bit about the role of associations in providing us with information; their role in helping us to analyze that information and their role in helping to influence the public policy developed by decision makers at all levels from local boards to national legislation.

In the U.S. we hear a lot about special interest groups and how they are having too great an influence on the development of public policy. In fact, I belong to an organization which opposes special interest lobbies and supports grass roots political involvement. I do that because, of course, I don't see our issues of civil rights and education for persons who are exceptional as a special interest group! I suppose it can be argued that they are but, it seems to me, that our special interests are inherently different from those of say, such lobbying groups as the tobacco industry or the liquor industry or even the oil and gas lobby. They are different at least in the sense that they are more basic to the lives of citizens but they are, in a very real way, a special interest. We are a special interest group which is under-funded, does not have dollars for campaign war chests and which represents a very small portion of the population. Nonetheless, to see how effective we can be we need only look at the success of the AARP, the Association for Retired People, to see how strong an association can be in disseminating and analyzing information and then using that information to influence public policy.

Much of the information which is of interest to us, especially on a national level but also

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on a state or provincial level is not carried in the mass media. We learn on the nightly television about the state of the budget for example but we do not hear how those budget cuts will affect us in the schools, or in a specific special education program. When a major piece of legislation is passed, such as the ADA bill, that information is in the mass media but no particulars about what the law entails are included. So, our first comprehensive source of information is usually from what we might call trade magazines such as Education Daily or the Special Educator or we receive it through electronic means, most often in this country from Special Net. The bulletin boards which contain that critical information are all maintained by Associations, including NASDSE which maintains the federal board; by CEC which maintains CEC.NEWS and by CASE which maintains CASE.NEWS. Trade newspapers and journals and electronic news sources are our primary means of staying well informed about the policy issues which confront us. Those issues include not only legislation and litigation but also the news of trends in public policy issues as diverse as school restructuring, least restrictive environment, the definition of various handicapping conditions, or personnel shortages.

In CASE we share our information through two addition regular publications. Our journal is called CASE in POINT and we are very proud of the changes we have made in it. It is now a refereed journal which we think carries the highest quality of articles when it is published twice each year. Our newsletter, which is published five times a year, carries information about issues and also, of course, information about our association. CASE also publishes the Leadership Review in Special Education as well as approximately 40 titles produced by our Research and Special Projects Committee.

The second critical function performed by our Associations is that they give us access to analysis of those public policy issues. Some of that analysis occurs in print, especially in our journals, but it also occurs in association meetings from the local to the international level. It occurs in conferences such as this one and in seminars and institutes which are association sponsored. I'd like to tell you about a couple of the events that CASE sponsors which we have found to be excellent forums for such analysis. CASE now sponsors an annual International Public Policy Conference on Special Education. The conference next year will be held at the Pan Pacific Hotel in San Diego, January 13-15, 1994. This conference has had excellent reviews and is designed to address the concerns of program and building administrators of special education programs. The Public Policy Conference is a broad based conference with strands on some areas of high interest such as school reform, litigation and legislation as well as sessions on a wide variety of topics including early childhood education, sessions for new administrators, for women administrators, on grant writing, a DC update, etc.

The second event is our annual Institute which focuses on one topic over the three days of the conference. This gives participants an opportunity to discuss a topic in depth and

also, since we meet in the morning and early evening with a long break in the afternoon, provides a welcome February break in Tampa. We think that providing for the mental health of administrators is also an important role of our association!

These issue and policy debates, whether in person or in print, enable us to hear a spectrum of opinion about proposed or perceived changes and to validate or alter our own opinion based on what we have learned.

The third function of associations is to provide us with a means, a mechanism, for influencing the development of public policy. Sometimes we have a tendency to think of our associations as an entity, an it, with a life of their own. That isn't true, of course, they are (in the words of Pogo) us. And that means that they are really a vehicle which we can guide in any direction we choose. They are what we choose to make them and can be used to accomplish whatever goals we select. If I may indulge in an aside for a moment, we in CASE have found that the deliberate setting of those goals has been extremely important to us in helping us to be sure we were guiding our vehicle in the direction we desired. The long range planning process we have used for the past four and one half years has been instrumental in improving our effectiveness in all areas but certainly the area of addressing public policy has been one of our strongest gains.

We influence public policy both reactively and pro-actively. Both kinds of action are critically important. However, I think that in general we, as special education professional associations, have been much more effective when we were acting reactively than pro-actively. Our history of influencing national legislation in the U.S. and provincial legislation in Canada has been exemplary. We are under-funded as a lobbying group but we have effective grassroots organization and that has enabled us to influence policy makers very positively on behalf of children and youth with disabilities. We have been somewhat less effective with regard to children and youth who are gifted but we are making gains in that area as well.

Here in the U.S., we have a long string of effective lobbying efforts. You are familiar with many of them. Those efforts included higher appropriations for IDEA, which, while not ever as great as we wished have been exemplary during a time of extreme budgetary constraints. We have moved forward in the area of early childhood. We had significant input into the re-authorization of the vocational education act and the re-authorization of the EHA now called IDEA. More recently, CASE was a leader in opposing the addition of ADD as a disability condition to IDEA. We are currently active regarding the issue of the new proposed definition for Seriously Emotionally Disturbed. While we were not successful on all fronts there is no question that our efforts have had and continue to have a major influence on how such legislation was or is drafted. Our efforts at a state and provincial level are also becoming more sophisticated and we are, as a result, becoming

more effective.

Our efforts over the past few years have, I think also taught us or re-taught us an important lesson. I mentioned earlier that we are a small group representing a small constituency. As I look back over the past year I think the most important event was not the major gains which we achieved but the fact that I see a beginning of a real collaboration and coalition among associations. The need for such combined efforts is obvious. Given our small numbers any fracturing of our efforts almost dooms us to failure. We have worked at coalitions for years and some of them, most notably the Coalition for Education Funding, have been successful. But there was both a quantitative and qualitative difference, I think, in the collaboration and coalescing which has occurred recently. First, we are working with groups with whom we are frequently not in agreement. Because we have been in agreement one some issues, we began to know one another and to seek and find common ground in ways which we have not in the past. From comments I heard in my own state as well as nationally I know that there was some surprise that those of us in special education really don't have as our goal the placement of every kid in North America in some kind of special program. We, on the other hand, were reminded that they really don't have an institutional policy of denying service to every kid who needs it.

Now, I am not suggesting that I think we will always be in agreement with those groups in the future on all issues. There are some inherent and healthy differences between the goals of the Schools Boards Associations, Chief State School Officers, Principal Associations, etc. and those of us in such associations as CASE, NASDSE and CEC. We don't even agree with each other all the time and that too is healthy. But I do think we developed a new respect for each other and a willingness to seek a common ground when that is possible. To the extent that we can find that common ground we can speak with a stronger voice and gain more support for our aims.

I said that this was a beginning and I meant that in two respects. First the collaboration was new and is therefore fragile. We have developed new relationships and tentatively begun to work together. Those relationships will take nurturing until we reach a point that we can all understand that because we disagree on one issue does not mean that we cannot come together again on another issue on which we do agree and that we must constantly seek those areas where we do agree or where we can give and take without compromising our integrity and basic intent.

The other way in which this was a only a beginning is that it was a collaboration, principally, between general and special education. Our base must be much broader. We have also made some tentative beginnings of working with the mental health community and non-educator early childhood service providers. We still have far to go in

collaborating with adult service providers, vocational educators and others concerned with the spectrum of birth to death services for persons with disabilities.

The next major step must be to develop such collaborative relationships with associations in business and industry. I believe that we can accomplish that goal and make them allies in securing appropriate services for children and youth with disabilities. Business and industry have already demonstrated that they know it is critical to their interests to have a strong educational system. It is our task to show them that a strong educational system for persons with disabilities is equally in their interest. In both the U.S. and Canada we have an aging population. One of the many implications of that demographic fact is that we will be faced, in the near future, with a worker shortage. Many industrialized nations in Europe have tried to address such shortages by importing labor from other countries. We may well do some of that as well. A more cost effective method to address the issue is to ensure that all our citizens are able to be productive citizens and workers and that, of course, includes persons with disabilities who are currently un- and under-employed in alarming numbers. All of those graduates have the potential to contribute to our society and their contribution has never been needed as badly as it will be in the next 20 years. That is a message we can carry and that business and industry can hear. It will require some new skills on our part to establish strong linkages outside the education community but surely no skills that are beyond our considerable abilities!

Another area in which we as association members influence public policy, both reactively and pro-actively, is in the development of regulations after legislation is enacted. Taking advantage of our opportunities to comment on proposed regulations and doing so with a combined voice is a powerful method of influencing public policy. As administrators we occupy a very unique position. If we go back, for a moment, to our earlier discussion of special interest groups and make an analogy in our microcosm of special education, we can be described as the only group of special educators who have an equal interest in, responsibility for and commitment to all exceptional children what ever their abilities or disabilities. I think that makes our responsibility for reviewing and commenting on proposed regulations especially important. We are able to see the impact of proposed regulations not only on the specific group for which it is intended but on all other groups as well.

I mentioned that we have been, I think, more effective in the reactive mode than in the proactive. That too, seems to be changing. We are, more and more, looking at initiating public policy. It is important that we do so in all areas but it is particularly critical that we do so with regard to our own profession as administrators of special education. I sometimes tell our board members - there are a number of groups of people who will advocate for children with disabilities and for those who are gifted and I count administrators as among their strongest advocates. There are a number of groups of

people who will advocate for teachers and, again, I count administrators as among their strongest advocates. But there are no other groups who will advocate for administrators of special education and so we must become ever more effect as our own advocates.

CASE is actively involved in that role. Our Board of Directors and Executive Committee have completed the important work begun by our Research and Special Projects Committee of developing a vision of the future of special education. Those of you who are members of CASE will be receiving a copy of that publication and a full set of materials is available from CASE to assist a local district in going through the process of developing their own vision of the future. We think that this is one of the most important proactive moves which CASE has ever made. The Professional Development Committee is working on a position paper on the future role of administrators of special education in order that we may influence how that role is shaped rather than be recipients of a future we did not help design. Our Policy and Legislation Committee developed a pamphlet on Section 504 to assist administrators in being proactive in designing systems to meet the requirements of 504. That publication has been so successful that in addition to each member receiving a copy as a bonus publication, we have sold over 3000 copies. In addition, we have developed position papers on LRE and on Service Delivery. Currently, we are working with CEC and with AASA to look at a new pilot approach to Title I and IDEA at the building level.

I've talked with you, this afternoon, about the role of associations in disseminating information about our field, their role in analyzing that information and in using that analysis to influence public policy both reactively and pro-actively. I'd like to close with just a few comments about your role. No one knows better than I the crisis management situations in which you live and work. Its difficult not to describe long range in terms of next week or, sometimes, the next hour. And because that is true, and because you have workloads that permit little time for reflection or even for yourselves and your families, it is easy <u>not</u> to read those draft regulations, <u>not</u> to write that letter to your Congress-person or Legislator or Minister. But one of the ways we can reduce the stress in our work lives is to empower ourselves to take control and one of the ways to take control is to influence the policy that is developed rather than being a recipient of the policies developed by others.

You are incredibly talented and powerful people. All that remains is for you to recognize your own power and to use it to shape your future. Obviously we can't do that individually but each of us, working in concert with out colleagues can do it. I urge you to become not just a dues paying member of your association (tho we certainly appreciate it!) but an active member who makes it what you want it to be and who uses it to shape your world and the world of the children whom we serve.
Thank You.